

# A Decade of Outreach Activities: Proactive Customer Engagement at Leeds Beckett University Library

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**Background:** An academic library is a university facility that the majority of students will use at some point during their studies, whether they are on or off campus. But should university libraries just wait for students to come and use their services? A number of researchers (Mellon, 1986; Bostick, 1992; DiPrince, 2016) refer to many students struggling with library anxiety, which DiPrince (2016, p.284) describes as “feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information, confused by library systems, and uncertain where to begin their research”. Bostick (1992, quoted in DiPrince, 2016, p.284) develops this further by describing five dimensions of library anxiety and lists the first dimension as “barriers with staff”. In addition to library anxiety, libraries today also face the challenge of library complacency, seeking to prove “the continuing relevance of the library as an information source” (Gremmels, 2015, p.273). With this in mind, during the Summer of 2006 when the library publicity team at Leeds Beckett University (then Leeds Metropolitan University) were asked to be involved in the two week Freshers’ Festival, we jumped at the opportunity. After all, as Dubicki (2009, p.175) notes, “every interaction with individuals on campus represents a golden opportunity for library staff to sell the services of the library”.

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## Fishy Freshers

The Leeds Met Life events were part of the Freshers’ Festival and took place across the two main campuses. The stalls were from different University services and were asked to be fun and interactive. Members of the library publicity team had recently attended Antony Brewerton’s marketing event “Marketing Gives You Wings” at Leeds University, and during one exercise had used fish as a marketing theme. This Fish idea was developed; library staff are always Friendly, Informative, Supportive and Helpful = FISH! The main aim was for students to play a simple game to win prizes and at the same time tell them about our library services. This first stall was deemed a success based on the number of student engagements (1800 student interactions over two days), and seemed to go down well with students and staff alike. Although we realised, from student discussions, that the Fishy branding may have been a little overdone and the library message may have been lost slightly. This

University event was not repeated the following year, so it was decided we should build on this initial success and develop a stall for the Students’ Union Freshers’ Fairs instead.

## Freshers’ Fair

At Leeds Beckett University, the two, one-day Freshers’ Fairs attract thousands of students looking around hundreds of stalls, for promotional gifts, in a vibrant, exciting and noisy environment that can challenge the senses. Other library teams - including Skills for Learning (the library academic skills support team) - had previously run stalls to promote their services to students and appreciated the importance of participating in the fairs. We saw attending the Freshers’ Fairs as an excellent opportunity to come out from traditional library spaces and proactively engage with new students in a less intimidating environment. As Boff et al. (2006, quoted in Dennis, 2012, p. 370) point out “one of the significant challenges facing academic

libraries today is the need to reach a diverse user population ... [and the] pressure to think of creative ways to market ourselves”.

The challenge was then to design a game to promote the recently introduced library 24/7 opening that would work in a Freshers’ Fair environment. A ‘Spin the clock’ game was created, and as Helen Loughran (Planning and Marketing Manager) recalls “we then harnessed the help of a Key Skills Tutor to ensure that the ‘random allocation device’ (still a spinning clock to us!) wasn’t biased”.

Interestingly, we found that returning students also attended the fairs. When they played our game, we were able to engage with them to see if they had visited the library and gain other feedback on the library and its services.

Following on from this a number of different themes and games have been used for the stall but the ‘Spin the Clock’ game has remained the most successful and used at several subsequent fairs. In our experience, for a stall to be successful it must follow a tried and tested formula:

- Simple game
  - Easy to explain the rules even if we have a stall next to the heavy metal society - as we did one year!
  - Quick enough to play but long enough for engagement
- Bright and inviting stall
  - Library branded pull-up stands and table cloths
  - Sparkles and lots of colourful visual props
  - Prizes students want to win
- Staff
  - Most importantly library staff who understand the value of this type of engagement and want to be involved

The stall has also provided the opportunity to spotlight different teams from across the library, including:

- Skills for Learning who have been involved for many years, offering study skills advice and promoting their programme of workshops

- Academic Librarians have seen the Fairs as another way to introduce themselves to their students
- The Library Resources Team who have helped to promote the Discover search tool
- The Learning Systems team have promoted the new name for the Portal & VLE service and encouraged student use of the associated mobile app

### Pop-up libraries

For some time, our main promotional events outside the library were the Freshers’ Fairs, but like other libraries we started to ‘pop-up’ elsewhere on campus. Initially we used the name ‘pop-up’ as an umbrella term for any library stall or promotional event that we delivered outside the library. As Davies et al. (2015, p.94) explains, “pop-up libraries are a simple and cost-effective way to raise the profile, enhance promotion, promote a positive image ... and reach people who do not use the library”. It is a concept that has been popular with libraries across different sectors, and can often involve taking resources outside the library and offering them to potential library users in a different, temporary environment. The intended outcome of the pop-ups we were delivering was to promote our services to students across campus, and we tried a number of different locations which had varying degrees of success:

- Student Hub

The location near to the refectory meant although we were in an area with a large footfall it was difficult to get students to stop; they were either on their way for food or to a lecture after eating.

- Carnegie Reception

A pop-up stall was set up in the reception area of the Carnegie sports centre, the low footfall meant there was little student engagement.

- Academic Librarians

A number of Academic Librarians’ held pop-ups, in the receptions or social areas of the buildings relevant to their schools, and these were considered to be very worthwhile, particularly with respect to the quality of the engagements they had with the academic staff in their areas.

### **Jigsaw@work training**

'Delivering a pop-up library service' training was arranged for a group of library staff during Summer 2016, most of whom had already worked on the pop-up library stalls. The training was very well received by those who attended, and allowed them the opportunity to stand back from the activities that had already been delivered and evaluate their success. The training (Jigsaw@work, 2016, p.2) highlighted the benefits of "effective pro-active customer engagement", which should be built around:

- A clear message
- A target audience
- A planned location to approach the target audience
- And a clear and measurable goal

The pop-up libraries that had previously been delivered had been intended to promote the library to as many students as possible, without actively identifying a target audience. The general consensus among staff had been that the purpose and message of the stall was not always clear; just being there to promote the library was not enough to get passing students to stop and fully engage.

The training proposed that targeting a specific group or audience instead can generate a greater return on time and resources, as "the highest yielding promotions have been very carefully targeted at a specific audience and lead with a specific product" (Jigsaw@work, 2016, p.8). The experience we had gained so far, together with the Jigsaw@work (2016) training, enabled us to appreciate the advantages of planning a programme of events to work alongside the University academic calendar, ensuring that each event had a specific focus and target audience, and that the staff involved in delivering the event were briefed and understood the key message.

### **Freshers' Festival 2016**

There was now a group of staff within the library who had gained valuable proactive customer engagement experience, backed up by the recent training, and were in a position to plan and deliver a programme of activities moving forwards. The first event that took place following on from the Jigsaw@work (2016) training was the Freshers' Festival in September 2016; we repeated our successful 24/7 theme but developed this further

to include things we had learnt on the training. Staff who worked on the stall attended a briefing beforehand and feedback was requested afterwards. During the event tickets were handed out for students to complete and hand in at the library Help and Information Point to enter a prize draw. These tickets were used to count the total number of engagements, and to encourage new students to visit the library.

### **Event evaluation**

1,445 engagements took place across both campuses during the Freshers' Festival, and 61 tickets were handed in at the Help and Information Point in the library for a prize draw (this was 4% of the total tickets handed out, our target was 5%; we knew from previous experience that a relatively low return should be expected).

From the 18 members of staff who worked on the stall, 8 returned feedback forms. The most interesting points to note from this were:

- 8 respondents (100%) found the pre-event briefing useful (highlighting the importance of continuing to brief staff prior to events)
- 4 respondents said that they found the prize draw made it easier to engage with students (therefore although the number returned was low, using it as staff tool to aid engagement could still be worth consideration)

### **Proactive customer engagement: a maturing model**

Following on from the Freshers' Festival, a programme of student engagement activities was planned for the forthcoming academic year. The programme involved teams from across the library and included pop-up library stalls held outside the library to communicate a key message (e.g. First Essay Week), staffed activities in the library but located away from the Help and Information Point (e.g. Get Started demonstrations to help new students access and use library services and resources), and library stalls at University organised events in collaboration with other key services (e.g. Mental Health Day organised by the Student Wellbeing Team).

The majority of these activities were mapped to the student study cycle, and the number of events that took place were concentrated during the

periods leading up to the busiest times in the academic calendar. In February 2017, there was a different engagement activity planned each week, and these were aimed to equip students with the information, skills and knowledge they would need to enable them to meet their approaching deadlines, complete their work and achieve their academic potential. The library held Dissertation pop-ups, Save IT stalls and Academic Skills Pop-Ups. The 'Development of the University Education Strategy' (Cardew, 2016, p.5) outlines that the Student Support Framework "will build on the creative and supportive learning and teaching environment ... to ensure that all students have access to timely support, at the right place and at the right level". Through targeting specific student groups at particular times of year we were striving to offer the appropriate level of help and support at the time when it was needed most.

Although each activity had a different focus, generally the same resources were needed for each event, and setting up the stalls became a smoother process as the year progressed. The specific tools that were needed for an individual event were designed with future use in mind, and a suite of activities has been developed for events moving forwards.

The number of students engaged varied dramatically between the different activities. Most of the pop-up library stalls that had lower engagement in terms of numbers, were still felt to be worthwhile due to the quality of the engagement. For example, during the Christmas pop-up library a relatively low number of students (59) were engaged, but anecdotal evidence suggests that key information was communicated to those students at a critical time of year; one student who visited the stall had not heard of 'Quote Unquote', the University's Harvard referencing publication, and we were able to convey this key information to them ahead of their approaching deadlines. The least successful of the events were the Get Started demonstrations, which were heavily publicised but had no take up at either campus, so the decision was made to not run these again in the future.

## Moving forwards

The programme of proactive customer service activities that is delivered by the library has now become well established, built upon a foundation of skills and knowledge acquired by the team from delivering these events over a number of years. Targeting a specific audience with a key message, in a planned location, mapped to the relevant time in the academic calendar has become central to the activities we organise. Now that the tools and techniques are in place, measuring the impact of these activities on student achievement will be a key area of development for the 2017-18 academic year.

Barnett et al. (2016, p. 115) explain how a "large scale Pop-Up Library program" was delivered and subsequently evaluated by Library Services at the University of Birmingham. During the events staff asked students to complete a questionnaire which contained questions relating to their current library use and academic skills, and to indicate if they would be happy to be contacted again for feedback in the future. The Library Services held 23 pop-up libraries with a total of 934 engagements, from which they received 301 responses to the on-stall questionnaire, and 15 students went on to complete a "follow-up impact survey" to "evaluate the effectiveness of the initiative" (Barnett et al., 2016, p.122). Although a high number of responses were received for the questionnaire, the number of responses received for the impact survey was "low" (Barnett et al., 2016, p.127), highlighting the challenges involved in gathering evidence relating to the impact of a proactive customer service event on the student academic experience.

Davis et al (2015, p.15) explain that pop-up libraries can "provide exciting new ways to discover products and services [and] create an enjoyable experience which differs from the norm"; by introducing a feedback mechanism to an event, such as a questionnaire, there is a risk that the enjoyment generated by the spontaneity of the interaction is lessened. However, there are a number of feedback mechanisms that could be considered to analyse the impact of future proactive customer engagement events:

- Asking one question at the end of each engagement could introduce a measure of

success without too great an impact on the overall experience

- Interviewing staff who have taken part in an event could be another way of measuring its value, and collecting this kind of anecdotal evidence would not interfere with the student experience
- Continuing to record the numbers of students engaged would also be worthwhile, and further work could be done with this data to add value and gain a deeper understanding of the benefits of proactive customer engagement (work has already been carried out to compare the number of engagements with the average number of enquiries on the Help and Information Points, to help evaluate the best use of staff time)
- The cost per student interaction could be analysed to ascertain value for money
- KPIs and feedback tools already being deployed to measure student satisfaction (such as NSS) can be taken into account when evaluating the overall success of LLI (Libraries and Learning Innovation) as a service

In addition, it is important to consider what the impact would be if we did not pursue proactive customer engagement activities, and therefore did not have a promotional presence outside the library at key University events and significant times during the academic year. The challenge is to investigate ways of measuring the impact that proactive customer service events have on the overall educational experience of students and student retention, but by collecting and piecing together different sources of feedback, a more detailed analysis of the benefits of organising these activities can be considered.

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